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Designing branded mobile apps: Fundamentals and recommendations

Zhenzhen Zhao *, Christine Balagué

Telecom School of Management, LITEM, Institut Mines-Télécom, 9 Rue Charles Fourier, 91000 Evry, France

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Abstract The development of mobile applications has represented a challenge and opportunity for companies to market their brands and products through a new channel; however, the branded mobile applications (branded apps) currently available in the market are far from perfect and existing app designs do not yet have well-established mobile and social features. This article offers systematic guidelines for branded app design by identifying different levels of strategies that should be taken into consideration by companies. We illustrate five business objectives (communication, customer relationship management, sales, product innovation, and marketing research) and identify five types of branded apps (tool-, game-, social-, m-commerce-, and design-centric). Three functional building blocks are proposed to specify how mobile features, social features, and brand mention elements should be incorporated into branded app development. Various examples of branded apps are provided to illustrate relevant best practices in order to guide marketers in improving branded app design.
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1. Branded apps: A new paradigm

The development of mobile phone applications has become very important to companies, most of which are actively engaged in implementing mobile strategies and are developing or actively deploying portfolios of mobile phone applications. Hinchcliffe (2013) predicts that the development of mobile strategies will continue to be a major challenge and that branded mobile applications (branded apps) will be widely adopted in the coming years. Companies have to adapt to this new culture, ensuring that the profiles and competences of marketers properly adjust to new consumer behaviors in the market.

Bellman, Potter, Treleaven-Hassard, Robinson, and Varan (2011) define the branded app as software that is downloadable to a mobile device and prominently displays a brand identity, often via the name of the app and the appearance of a brand logo or icon throughout the user experience. One reason behind the popularity of branded apps as marketing devices is that their high level of user engagement makes the advertising messages they convey highly persuasive (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009).

 * Corresponding author
  E-mail addresses: zhenzhen.zhao@it-sudparis.eu, zhen.hci@gmail.com (Z. Zhao), christine.balague@it-sudparis.eu (C. Balagué)

Research has tested the actual impact of branded apps on users. Bellman et al. (2011) employed an experimental design to confirm that the use of branded apps has positive persuasive impact, increasing brand interest. Other studies have measured user adoption of and responsiveness to mobile apps. Because mobile apps focus on real-time relationships with consumers, in this context, relationship management is more consumer-instant-action-centric than conversation-centric. Therefore, a challenge faced by companies relates to how to capture user attention. A difference between mobile and web services noted by Oinas-Kukkonen and Kurkela (2003) is the usage context. People often use mobile devices in noisy and distracting environments. However, real-time contextual information, including peer-to-peer information and recommendations, generates new consumer behaviors in the market. Kourouthanassis, Georgiadis, Zamani, and Giaglis (2010) identified expected performance as a significant determinant of the acceptance of mobile marketing offers. Ho and Syu (2010) found that the main motives for and rewards from using mobile apps are entertainment, functionality, information, socialization, intellectual stimulation, following a trend, and learning. However, to date, no studies have identified the features that companies can use to develop their branded app strategies.

The goal of this article is to provide marketers with a method to develop branded app strategies that will allow them to benefit from this fast-growing trend. In section 2, we classify the business objectives of branded apps into five categories: communication, customer relationship management (CRM), sales, open innovation, and marketing research. In section 3, by analyzing and evaluating mobile apps designed by several top-100 brands, we identify five types of branded apps: tool-, game-, social-, m-commerce-, and design-centric. Various examples of branded apps are provided to illustrate the best practices associated with different types of apps and features. In section 4, we propose three functional building blocks to identify which factors should be taken into consideration in branded app design; specifically, we describe mobile features, social features, and brand mention elements and further illustrate how these features should be integrated into branded apps. In section 5, we provide recommendations to marketers and conclude the article with directions for future research.

2. Business objectives of branded apps

When brands decide to create mobile apps, they first have to define clear business goals. In this

Figure 1. Five main business objectives in branded app design

section, we introduce five business objectives of branded apps. As shown in Figure 1, these goals are communication, CRM, sales, product innovation, and marketing research. Note that individual branded apps can have more than one business objective and individual brands can design multiple mobile apps to target different products and business goals.

The first goal of branded apps is communication. This includes communicating brand values, information, and products, thereby enhancing brand image and increasing brand awareness. Most branded apps achieve this goal as one of the business objectives of app design.

The second business goal of branded app design is CRM. Branded apps can perform well as intermediaries between brands and customers. The objective is to manage company interactions with current and future customers. This includes brand engagement with loyal customers, the collection of user data, and the generation of product recommendations to current and potential clients.

The third goal of designing branded apps is increasing sales. Branded apps aim to create completely new purchasing experiences and interaction models for users, with a whole set of capabilities including location awareness, context sensing, and product customization.

The fourth goal is product innovation. Branded apps can support open innovation by allowing users to generate new ideas for products; for example, they can build a community for the sharing and rating of ideas, with the most highly rated idea often being rewarded and adopted by the brands.

The last goal of branded app development is marketing research. Branded apps can help companies survey users in new ways. In the shampoo market, for instance, some companies have asked women to share photos taken with their mobile devices to express their opinions about good/bad hair appearance. This process provides marketers with value-added information to better understand consumer behaviors.